

## Stage 6 English Advanced: 'Fiery the angels fell.' Comparative Study of Texts and Context: In the Wild -*Brave New World* and *Blade Runner*, Noel Morris, St George Girls' High School

### Nature

A good place to start in the study of this elective is to consider the long, complex history of humanity's perception of, and definition of, 'nature'. Nature has sometimes been seen as a force or pattern extrinsic to humanity. Something standing outside of humanity. It has been perceived as an inimical, hostile thing, part of a binary pairing of opposites – humanity on one hand and nature on the other, or Humanity versus Nature. Antithetical entities. Nature as something to be overcome, defeated, exploited, defied as humanity pursues its course of advancement, the upward path to higher civilisation.

Western Christian thought saw scriptural justification for humanity perceiving itself as being given dominion over nature. Genesis 1, 28 'And God blessed them (Adam and Eve/humankind) and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and **subdue** it: and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' Often the emphasis was on the 'subdue' and 'have dominion over' rather than the 'replenish'.

In line with this view, nature can be seen as a force which circumscribes, or reduces, humanity's freedoms and against which we have always struggled. All technology - from fire, which gave us mastery over the cold and the night, through the wheel which gave us power over gravity and distance, through to the internet which allows us to defy boundaries of time and place – has been aimed at freeing us from nature's hold on us. Medical science has been almost exclusively directed at ensuring that we prolong our allotted life span, overcome our defects and disabilities, defy the aging process. To my mind, Huxley in *Brave New World* is exploring the tension between being mired in the primitive at the mercy of nature and the soulless removal from all contact with nature which the World State represents.

Another, contrary, view of nature is that rather than being an opposing, hostile force, exterior to humanity, it is a system of which we are a part. That we as 'poor bare forked animals' (*King Lear*) should be in



tune with nature, see ourselves as just one of many species sharing the earth, subject to all the rhythms of the natural. This view suggests that nature does not exist to be ex-

ploited for humanity's benefit and that by diminishing nature we diminish ourselves: by disregarding nature we lose our way. This view sees humanity's best interests lying in attuning ourselves to this greater, all-encompassing force. To take our lead from, and take heed of, what nature and its rhythms have to teach us.

At various times and in various contexts we have held these conflicting views, or versions of them, sometimes simultaneously. Humanity often uses nature as a yardstick of what is 'normal' or 'moral.' In fact what is 'natural' is often driven by political and philosophical values. 'Nature' is a rather slippery construct.

### Context

This module asks students to be aware of context and its impact on text, so it is essential to have some familiarity with the ways context impacts upon both the creation and reception of text. *Brave New World* and *Blade Runner* have in common, of course, the genre of dystopic science fiction. Each composer has extrapolated or projected from his own time elements of contemporary trends which he found disconcerting into an imagined future. Dystopic fiction is always about social organization rather than gadgets and gee whizzery and both of these texts do concern themselves very much with how societies might structure themselves in the future if contemporary trends continued, whilst obviously critiquing their own societies. Where they differ, of course, is in their contexts of composition. This has caused them to present us with very different world orders. The World State in *Brave New World* for example is still a 'state' run by a governing body. As misguided as it may be, the World State has as its goal the welfare of its citizens. After WWI the League of Nations' aspirations for international co-operation were based on the concept that the major players in world affairs would be nation states – represented by governments. Huxley envisaged governments maintaining power into the future; as being the most powerful social, political

and financial entities. Half a century later, in *Blade Runner* Scott presents us with a world where governments are no longer the major players in world affairs. We now live in a world where increasing globalisation has seen multi-national or global businesses have much greater wealth and influence than many nations. The Tyrrell Corporation seems to have virtual sovereignty over the world or, at the very least, is so powerful as to break the law with impunity, or have the police at its beck and call. (The very name suggests 'tyrant'). This 1980s projection into the future sees a world run **by big business for the benefit** of big business. 'Commerce is our goal', says Eldon Tyrrell to Deckard. There is no altruism here, misguided or otherwise. This is a world founded on the profit motive.

A cautionary word about context. It is very easy to generalise about context, but contexts are rarely clear cut. We all live in the opening years of the twenty first century but each reader of this article has different views, values and experiences which provide the context of their understanding. Huxley was writing at a time when rapid industrialisation, consumerism, mass production and technological advancement were to him rampant and threatening. Technological advancement fuelled by mass-production and consumerism would become the driving force behind social organization. He envisaged a world where technology became the master not the servant. The cataclysmic destruction of the First World War and the signs of the rise of totalitarian dictatorships in a number of countries caused him to envisage a possible future where stability would become the ultimate good. The upheaval of WWI made many yearn for stability at all costs. The national divisions which created international wars of vast scale made a League of Nations, the forerunner of the UN, seem a wonderful way to eradicate rivalry. Stability seemed a seductive goal and pragmatism would suggest that the means would justify the ends. The Great Depression of 1929 saw one nation's economic collapse reverberate around the world. The need to regulate supply and demand on an international basis and hence stabilise world markets was felt by many and is clearly apparent in *Brave New World*.

Science and technology have always seemed threatening to us. The current cloning, genetic engineering, stem cell research debates are evidence of this. Each advancement takes humanity further and further from its reliance on, or relationship with, the natural world. Each development sees us struggling with the moral dilemmas which are freshly thrown up and for which we are unprepared. For Huxley the acceleration of technology and scientific advancement seemed to be hurling humanity along this path of divorcement from its connectedness with nature's rhythms and into areas of moral ambiguity.

It can be said that one man's utopia is another man's

hell and Huxley can be seen as constructing a dystopia which to him was utterly repugnant. An anti-utopia where a privileged upper middle class man of the western world, writing for a western world middle class audience saw individual freedom and autonomy (the kind of freedom and autonomy which could only be experienced by the Western middle class male) circumscribed if not annihilated in an irrevocable manner. What makes a dystopia truly dystopic is the impossibility of ever undoing the social system. The World State is immutable, unassailable. There are no dissenting voices, there is no public debate and no possibility of the world state being undermined or re-ordered. Individuality, science, free thought and religion are eradicated or tightly controlled.

Students should also be aware that both texts exist in the context of the literary of dystopic fiction. They handle it very differently, of course. Huxley was writing in a long tradition of Utopian and Anti-utopian works - Plato, More, Jonathan Swift, the Russian Zamyatin - and in turn became part of that tradition, inspiring others like George Orwell to write almost in answer to his text. Huxley chooses the medium of comic satire where development of character and other elements of the novel form seem secondary to the ideas he wishes to explore. It is easy to see how much of this 'novel of ideas' is carried by such contrivances as the opening lecture at the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre - the very core of the World State- and the final dialectical conversation between Mustapha Mond and John Savage.

Scott in *Blade Runner* blends the film noir and science fiction genres and draws heavily upon audience expectations of these genres and the dystopic tradition for his effect.

### The texts and nature

The opening<sup>1</sup> of *Brave New World* very clearly paints the antagonism between the human and the natural.

A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State's motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.

The enormous room on the ground floor faced towards the north. Cold for all the summer beyond the panes, for all the tropical heat of the room itself, a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic goose-flesh, but finding only the glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of a laboratory. Wintriness responded to wintriness. The overalls of the workers were white, their hands gloved with a pale corpse-coloured rubber. The light was frozen, dead, a ghost. Only from the yellow barrels of the microscopes did it borrow a certain rich and

living substance, lying along the polished tubes like butter, streak after luscious streak in long recession down the work tables. (p.1)

In this world it is the barrels of the microscopes, symbols of human science, which have life. The light, symbol of the natural, finds only 'glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of a laboratory' (note the jarring plosives). The very womb of this world is cold, sterile and forbidding. Nature is held at bay.

**BRAVE NEW WORLD** offers us a world where humanity has literally been lifted out of nature. The natural rhythms of birth, struggle, human bonding, ageing, death have been all but eradicated. By almost any measure of humanity we care to apply, the citizens of the World State are another species. The state has taken special care to ensure that all conflicting loyalties have been neutralised. There are no loyalties to parents, children, siblings or family – these things do not exist. There are no loyalties to spouses or lovers as these no longer exist. Monogamy is conditioned against, sex is no longer a bond with any meaning. Religion is channelled into state sanctioned Solidarity Services. Ford blended with God. Community has replaced individuality.

When people elect to live in social groups there is always a ceding of individual freedoms. Social cohesion can only come at the cost of loss of individual autonomy. The whole can only function if its constituents relinquish some rights. Huxley portrays a world where social cohesion is more valued than individuality. And nature as the source of and formative influence on individual uniqueness is the enemy. Bokanovskification is, as Mustapha Mond says, the 'foundation on which everything else is built.' Indefinite Bokanovskification is what the world state would like to be able to do but laments it cannot.

The debate about what makes us human is bigger than this article can encompass. However, the human condition can generally be seen as being born to eventually die, to be subject to the vagaries of fate, to seek some meaning in it all. Along the way we age, suffer pain, grief, fear and hopefully joy. We love, bond, reproduce and wrestle with our own demons. 'Why am I here, what does it all mean?' The citizens of the World State experience little of this. Decanted, conditioned, predestined, they experience no frustration, pain or grief. They have no one to grieve for, no unconsummated desires, no unrequited love, no problems or hardships to overcome, no demons to wrestle with. They do not experience their own mortality. They are born perfectly formed (according to caste), age without declining until a rapid death which they are conditioned to accept. They are never alone to suffer doubt, trepidation or susceptibility to some spiritual dimension. There is no questing after understanding or wisdom as all truth has been reduced to hypnopædic platitudes, ready packaged and as

easy to swallow as soma. 'What man has joined nature is powerless to put asunder,' says the Director of the conditioning process.

Nature and its rhythms are the enemy of the World State. Stability is the ultimate good. Stability comes with a lack of difference. A lack of individuality. A lack of disquiet, a lack of vulnerability to the world around us. Nature is chaotic, it has elements of randomness, wildness and unpredictability. The citizens of the World State are conditioned to dislike nature not just because enjoyment of nature generates no consumption but because it generates a kind of counter-conditioning. Exposure to nature would run counter to the conditioning of its citizens. Nature has lessons to teach which threaten the orthodoxy of the World State. Viviparous birth, parental bonding with young, savagery of survival, pain, violence, fear and death. Atmospheric tumult, storms. These things create instability and are proscribed by the state. They would offer the citizens of the world state heterogeneous, spontaneous experience.

The natural world that citizens do occasionally visit is nature tamed. The English countryside into which John retreats had been tamed for centuries. The Reservation represents a wilder natural world and is carefully locked away from World State citizens. Lenina's horror at old age, breast feeding, pain, squalor, blood, viviparous birth makes her recoil. This world, which presents much of what Huxley's generation would regard as natural human behaviour, represents the world humanity has lost contact with. Huxley is not wholeheartedly endorsing this way of life. He clearly presents this end of the spectrum of human existence, this low tech world, as unenviable. It represents humanity at the mercy of the natural world. He seems to my mind to pose the question of where along the continuum of primitivism to soulless, aseptic homogeneity do we want the pendulum to rest. A little like John's feet swinging through the compass points at the end of the novel seeking a direction.

Huxley was writing in an era where nature was generally regarded as resilient. Widespread concern with environmentalism and awareness of pollution and environmental degradation began in the 60s. The World State has marginalised nature, sidelined it not destroyed it. From his lighthouse John, in his self-punitive asceticism, is a little disturbed by the beauty of his natural surroundings.

The woods, the open stretches of heather and yellow gorse, the clumps of scotch firs, the shining ponds with their overhanging birch trees, their water lilies, their beds of rushes – these were beautiful and, to an eye accustomed to the aridities of the American desert, astonishing. (p.201)

The natural world has not been destroyed, merely

rendered irrelevant to the citizens of the World State. They have almost no point of contact with it.

A love of nature keeps no factories busy. In the early stages of the novel we learn that their own life cycles are almost devoid of any connection with natural rhythms. The natural world, extrinsic to them, is quarantined. Physically and psychologically it does not impinge upon them because of the barriers of regulation and conditioning. They are cocooned from it in every conceivable way. When Lenina in her helicopter ride is above the English Channel with the tumult of the waves below, the sense of her vulnerability in the face of a superior, uncontrollable and unpredictable force makes her recoil.

On their way across the Channel, Bernard insisted on stopping his propeller and hovering on his helicopter screws within a hundred feet of the waves. The weather had taken a turn for the worse; a south-westerly wind had sprung up, the sky was cloudy.

'Look,' he commanded.

'But it's horrible,' said Lenina, shrinking back from the window. She was appalled by the rushing emptiness of the night, by the black foam-flecked water heaving beneath them, by the pale face of the moon, so haggard and distracted among the hastening clouds. (p. 74)

Nature is dangerous to the World State. Where it can't be eradicated or effectively prohibited it is carefully re-channelled. Pregnancy Substitutes and Violent Passion Surrogates are attempts by the World State to re-channel innate natural biological/emotional drives into socially harmless experiences. Orgy porgy is a channelling of spiritual or ecstatic fervour into a positive community-affirming celebration of unity.

Huxley does, however, makes it clear that the humanity within us is inherently resilient. That our connection with the natural world is impossible to sever completely. Linda despite her conditioning loves John, her maternal bonding or maternal instincts overcome her repugnance at what has become of her. Lenina despite her conditioning has monogamous tendencies and develops a love for John. Helmholtz Watson, although not quite sure of what it is he wants to write, knows there is a dimension missing to his consciousness. An emotional sensibility he needs to explore.

We cannot help but side with John in his rejection of the World State. To live untouched by those things which we regard as forging and tempering our humanity is unimaginable. It is repugnant to us to think of a world devoid of individual consciousness, devoid of the shaping, humanising experiences which, although often painful, we recognise as essential to the human condition. The natural rhythms which we

are susceptible to make us what we are, make us human.

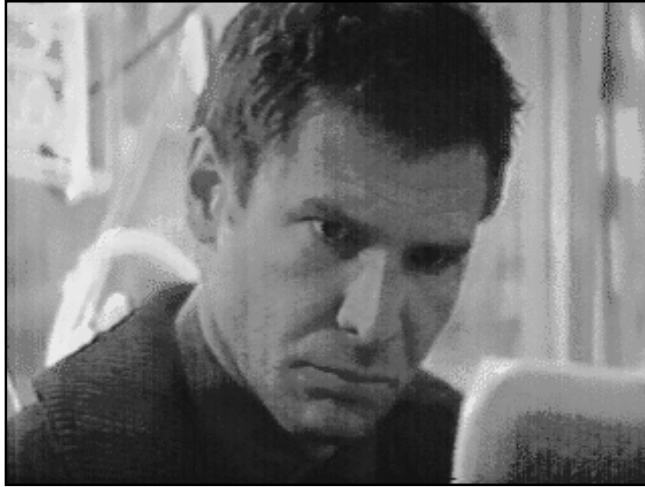
The late 1970s and early 1980s, the context for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, have contributed to a very different futuristic dystopic vision. A number of trends discernable in the depiction of the future at this time are worth pointing out. The 1980s was a period where concern with environmental issues was becoming a very powerful and prominent public issue. We were reshaping our conception of nature, was no longer seen as an infinitely renewable, infinitely exploitable resource. People were seeing nature as under threat. Endangerment and extinction of animal species, acid rain, pollution, smog, global warming, holes in the ozone layer, visual and aural pollution, overpopulation, urbanisation, the exhaustion of non-renewable resources were pressing environmental issues. Nature was, for the first time in the popular imagination, vulnerable, irreparably damageable, under threat, under siege from human activity.

The world was now seen as ruled by powerful multinational companies whose political influence was boundless. 'Greed is good' was often quoted as the credo of the 80s, the decade of greed. Big business was also seen as the main culprit in the predominance of widespread pollution. Whilst there was a strong move to 'think globally and act locally' which emphasised individual responsibility, there was a clear focus on the culpability of the corporate world in damaging the environment. It was an age in which multinational companies, forced to clean up their acts at home in the industrialised west and exported their acts of pollution to 'third world' countries where there were laxer controls.

The 80s was also the time of Reaganism (US), Thatcherism (UK), an worldwide economic rationalism which saw the rise of a permanent underclass. Where second generation street people lived in an emerging subculture. One of the writers of *Blade Runner*, Hampton Fancher said that he saw the film as partly an attack on Reaganism. This was a government position which removed the welfare safety net and saw the state remove itself from many of its social responsibilities allowing the markets to self regulate. We see evidence of a critique of Reaganism within *Blade Runner* with the scuttling, deformed street people 'little people' who live a scavenging/criminal existence as fringe-dwellers. This is not a world of compassion for one's fellow man. It is a place divided into the haves and the have-nots. Fancher comments:

'But *Blade Runner* was always meant to be cautionary. For instance, BR was shot during the dawn of Reaganism. And I was flabbergasted by Ronald Reagan and everything he stood for. So the cruel politics portrayed in the film were my rebuttal of Reaganism, in a sense.'<sup>2</sup>

The rise of Asian tiger economies also saw a paranoia of an Asian takeover of the western world. The Asianisation of LA, I think, represents western fear of cultural displacement. It is not dissimilar to the British Huxley perceiving English culture overrun by the US in *Brave New World* (Fordism). Asia has also been seen as synonymous with high density of population which adds another dimension to the depiction of an overcrowded world. Cityspeak represents a multicultural melding of tongues but it also suggests the displacement of English as the American national language.



Urbanisation was also an issue in this period as people began to see overdevelopment caused through population pressure and centralisation of industry result in ever increasing concentration of population in crowded, high rise, artificial cities devoid of contact with grass, trees, countryside. A generation of the Western middle class who remembered a suburban or semi-rural upbringing, of contact with grass, trees, gardens, open space, moonlight, starry skies, found itself lamenting the loss.

LA 2019 is a metonym for a world which has been exploited almost to death. The talking billboards constantly seduce the citizen with the opportunity to start again. Animals are almost extinct and as a result of market forces have been commodified. Not even Tyrrell can afford a real owl. The opening panoramic sequence of the film shows LA to be never-ending, a megalopolis of industrialised, polluted, boundlessness. It is high rise, technology-driven and mesmerising. This is a world where commercialism has run rampant. Hovering, talking billboards pollute the skies, citizens wear masks to avoid smog and pollution, it is constantly raining (acid rain) and distinctions of night and day are hazy. We also learn from the opening crawl that humanity is seeking to revisit this devastation on other planets. There is no plant life in this urban jungle. The most obvious symbols of humanity's relationship to the natural world are the bonsai trees in Deckard's apartment and Tyrrell's office. Representing an Asian aesthetic they also symbolise nature retarded, cuts-down, controlled, commodified, shrunk to manageable size. Nature rendered tame and biddable. Commerce, Mammon is the new god. His temple is the ziggurat style Tyrrell Building, a monument to the pursuit of profit. The ziggurat shape suggests the hierarchical nature of this society: the wealth of the few built on the toil of

the many. Paradoxically, however, when we enter this building it seems to be all façade. The shining, gleaming, twinkling technologically marvellous exterior yields to a retro, noirish, smoky interior which suggests the facadism of this world. It's hollow at the core. The riches suggested by the exterior are not shared by the serial-numbered workers who labour in the interior. Humanity has sold its soul to a false idol. 'Fiery the angels fell.' In this most artificial of environments, this unnatural desolate landscape, humanity has lost its way, and this is symbolised

by its loss of contact with the natural world. If the eye is the window to the soul what we see reflected in that opening shot of the eye is hell.

The inhabitants of this world are those who cannot escape, who cannot pass the fitness checks. Gaff's limp, Tyrrell's oversized glasses, Sebastian's accelerated decrepitude, the various eye-patched citizens are symbolic of the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of this world. This is a world of isolation, estrangement, jaded cynicism and spiritual desolation. All of the key characters live alone. Sebastian makes his own friends; obscene travesties of human life. Tyrrell lives alone atop his kingdom, a singular god-like creature. Deckard lives alone in his compartmentalised living space. Even Chew, the eyemaker, works alone. For all its overcrowdedness this world is still a world of loneliness and desolation. Any signs of hope and regeneration, human connectedness, are absent. It is also a world of miscommunication. One of the earliest scenes at the noodle bar has three people all pretending to be unable to communicate. Deckard, the shopkeeper and Gaff all seem to use language as a way to avoid communication. Deckard's coercive and distasteful sexual exploitation of Rachael is a parody of human intimacy.

Scott's overlay of film noir characteristics adds very strongly to the atmosphere of desolation and isolation. Film Noir depicted a world of jaded cynicism, of world weariness, deceit and betrayal. It is the world of the anti-hero. Deckard for all his machismo succeeds only in shooting a fleeing woman in the back, shooting another woman who is executing tumbles and getting beaten up a lot. This seedy world of the mean streets is a morally ambiguous one. It is hard to admire Deckard and harder to hate the replicants. For me the reason *Blade Runner* was a box office flop was because it failed to resolve itself along the simplistic lines of good guy cop kills bad guy

replicants, so dear to the hearts of main stream audiences.

This setting is Los Angeles, the city of Angels and Scott presents it as a city of fallen angels. The opening shot with its fiery stacks, strongly suggests the inferno. This industrial wasteland was referred to as 'the Hades landscape' by those working on the film.<sup>3</sup> Hell is where the angels fell, it is the place those who have lost their souls inhabit. This is a world after the fall. The Garden of Eden, that archetype of humanity's oneness with nature has been lost. This is a world of lost innocence. A world of sullying experience. The greatest symbol of moral bankruptcy in this world is the existence of the replicants. These creatures symbolise how far the profit motive can push us along an amoral path. These creatures have been created more human than human. But they have been created as slaves. They work in inhospitable environments, they are built as combat models to kill and be killed at the bidding of their masters and some are 'basic pleasure models' - sexual slaves. They have been made beautiful and skilled but with a dreadful meanness of spirit have been life-limited.

The replicants are paradoxical and complex symbols. They represent human aspirations. They are beautiful and powerful. They represent the human condition in accelerated form. They are seeking an explanation for their existence, they want more life than has been allotted them. Above all, they desire to confront their maker, to have some meaning made of it all. They symbolise the appalling amorality of the humans who manufactured them. They also symbolise the innocence humanity has lost. Roy's 'Gosh, you've really got some great toys here' highlights the innocence of these creatures who are four years old. These creatures are known by their first names where all the humans are known by their surnames. They bond with each other. They live as a group, care for and mourn each other. Demonstrate loyalty and love. They have an elemental wildness about them. Roy strips down to a Lear-like 'unaccommodated man', he dips his fingers in Pris's blood and paints his face, he howls like an animal in grief at her death and in existential pain. He represents humanity in the wild, but not the wilderness. Somehow despite all that he has seen or maybe because of all he has seen he is able to transcend vengeance. He saves Deckard. Scott imbues him with some strong Christian symbolism. As Decekr drives a nail through his hand the Christ associations become powerful. Christ as symbol of saviour, redeemer. (Roy's damaged hand parallels Deckard's damaged hand.) As Roy releases the pigeon/dove into the blue skies, a perpetuation of Judeo-Christian symbolism, the suggestion of his spirit ascending as well as hope after desolation (the Noah's Ark myth) seems to indicate that humanity's only hope is to reconnect with its lost innocence. When Roy reaches out to Deckard he breathes new life into him.

The unicorn which represents one of the few natural creatures of the film is important. The dream sequence shows the unicorn running free in a natural environment' unfettered, graceful, in its element. Although a mythical creature it represents freedom and power, escape from the claustrophobic world Deckard inhabits.

*Blade Runner* depicts life in a ravaged, urbanised world. A world where nature has been damaged, almost eradicated. Where the earth itself is being abandoned by the able bodied with little evidence that anything has been learned from the experiences of destruction. The urban world is a symbol of life cast adrift from the natural world. The natural sensitivities, sensibilities, connectedness with others which reflect with communion with the natural world are absent. The only hope for this world is the possibility of humanity reconnecting with its lost prelapsarian innocence. Deckard's dream unicorn running free in a natural environment and his and Rachael's blossoming relationship, allied with Gaff's gift of life are the signs of hope. Yet if Deckard is himself a replicant our interpretation is even more bleak. What hope humanity?

In these two texts we have depictions of worlds where humanity has lost its way. Lost its soul, if you will. In *Brave New World* humanity has lost its contact with the wild, with nature, as a deliberate policy of the World State because nature or the lessons learnt from nature generate instability. Humanity has been sealed off from the natural world, from natural instinctive behaviour and from any real communion or connectedness with fellow humans. Humanity needs not be in tune with the surrounding world and its rhythms but in tune with the policies and practices of the state. The beings who inhabit this world are human in name only. They are beings largely reduced to social and economic functionality

In *Blade Runner* humanity has lost contact with nature, not as a deliberate act of policy but as a side effect of industrialisation, exploitation, greed and indifference. Nature is felt as an absence. The beings who inhabit this world are missing a dimension of humanity. They feel the loss of nature and the natural world, seemingly lamenting its absence but damaged by the pursuit of goals which have cut them adrift from each other and from the natural world around them.

Notes:

1. Huxley, Aldous *Brave New World*, Longman Literature, Editor Robert Southwick, 1991
2. Sammon, Paul M., *Future Noir The Making of Blade Runner*, Orion Media, 1996 p.110
3. Sammon, p.231